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ABSTRACT

Freshman and sophomore composition students who are required to write in response to literature frequently find that they are not yet secure enough in their basic writing skills to discuss a literary work. In order to help these students, writing center tutors must be familiar with the assigned writing tasks and what instructors expect from an assignment. If possible, course syllabi, a catalogue of required readings, copies of these texts, and sample or model papers should be kept on file in the writing center. For situations in which the assigned tutor is not familiar with the piece of literature under study, the student can be tutored by a senior literature major, or by a professor/tutor from the English department. Another approach is small group brainstorming or study sessions to discuss the work, during which time the tutor can provide feedback on suggested writing topics. Subsequent individual tutoring sessions can help a student gain a perspective for writing a personal response to a work, or limit a topic to a focused thesis for a critical essay. For the latter, library research skills can also be taught by writing center tutors. (HTH)

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Literature in the Writing Center:

Helping Students Write in Response to Literature

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Literature in the Writing Center:
Helping Students Write in Response to Literature

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Many colleges and universities have recently revised their composition courses to include freshman or sophomore writing in response to literature. If the course is a second-in-a-sequence requirement, following the traditional expository-argumentative writing course, students frequently find themselves in double trouble. Not yet secure in their basic writing skills, they must now understand a literary work, and worse yet in their eyes, write something about it. As this situation occurs, tutors in our writing centers are faced with not only assisting the student with his written composition, but also with initially helping him achieve an understanding and perspective upon which he can formulate a thesis for his essay. The following presentation will outline and discuss one relatively brief approach by which writing tutors can confront this new situation.

The first step in the process is paradoxically the most obvious, yet oftentimes the most difficult depending upon the size of the school's English department and the diversity of the literature selections studied in the various composition courses. The Writing Center must become familiar, and as knowledgeable as possible, with the assigned writing tasks. We need to know, for instance, if the individual instructor will accept a student's comparison between his farm and the Joads' lost

land from The Grapes of Wrath. When the student comes to the Center for help with that comparison, we do him a limited amount of good if the professor really wants a literary critical approach, perhaps analyzing Jim Casy as a Christ-figure.

The argument is often presented that it is not directly the Center's responsibility to know each instructor's assignments. I'll agree with this to a point. Oftentimes, however, the student is honestly confused about the assignment or unaware of the approach he should be focusing upon, especially if writing about literature is something new to him. In cases such as these, the Center can guide the student and complement the course instruction. Frequently our guidance comes with the blessings of the course instructor who's pleased that his students have an additional avenue of outside help beyond his office hours.

So how do we accomplish the obvious? Initially it takes some legwork and a few hours of organizational skills, coupled with a file cabinet. Normally we visit all basic writing courses at semester's beginning to present our case for visiting the Center. During this visit, we need to make additional contact with the course instructor in the literature-writing courses. We should ask for permission to file a copy of the course syllabus (another obvious point here: never demand a syllabus or put the professor on the defensive). From the syllabus, we can see and start to catalogue the required literature readings. For those instructors who may not distribute a course syllabus or reading list--some still don't--we

should schedule an appointment so that we can compile our own list of the readings. We should also ascertain the expectations of the individual instructors, and advise the professor of how the Center can help complement his course. When I suggest ascertaining the professor's expectations, I mean very basically that we want to determine whether the instructor will accept impressionistic responses to the literature (staying with Grapes: "I think Steinbeck overstated his condemnation of big business in The Grapes of Wrath."), or whether the instructor requires the more formal critical approaches ("Ma Joad's character is presented indirectly and the character develops throughout the novel."). This initial and very basic distinction, catalogued and filed properly in the Center, will allow us to provide more than basic skills help to that student with the draft of his farm land compared to the Joads'.

Essentially, my argument is that we in our Centers do need to become familiar with the course materials and the approach expected in these literature-writing courses, if we want to be the most helpful to the student and if we wish to support or reaffirm the instruction taking place in the classroom. Call it the "tutor's homework" if you will. We are, indeed, going beyond the basic writing skills. When necessary, we will be guiding the student's thought processes in response to the literature.

Someone may ask whether we are now intruding. Shouldn't this guidance and direction be properly occurring in the classroom under the instructor's direction? Yes. And it probably

does. No. We're not intruding or imposing; we're supplementing. As we experience more literature-writing students coming to the Center, we encounter their muddled perceptions and often half accurate points of view regarding what they've discussed in the literature. For them, it's something new, a formidable task. It certainly can't hurt the attitude toward our Centers if we can support classroom instruction with additional perception or clarification.

Quite a task, you say. Too idealistic, optimistic. Perhaps. But only so if our university happens to have fifty different professors using two hundred separate titles. If the university is that diverse, so should be the staffing of the Center allowing us to at least attempt the task anyhow.

Let me return momentarily to the beginning of this logistics problem. We've visited the class; we've obtained the syllabus; either directly with the professor or indirectly through the syllabus, we've noted the approaches he'll allow. Now more of the obvious. In the Center our file cabinet should be accumulating folders on the particular course and its approach. Another folder might alphabetize all of the literature selections with course and professor's name for quick access and reference. Some of us may even be lucky enough to forget the file and store this information on our Center's computer.

Two more items can be of great help at the outset. It's good to have copies of the text in the Center for quick reference. Sometimes, the Center's copy need not be purchased, but

can be obtained at least for the semester from the professor. Just ask him. We profs are like 747's in this respect: we have backups for every system. If we're teaching Grapes, we have at least four copies around, one of which can be lent to the Center particularly to help our students.[1] A second aid is the sample paper. If the instructor distributes and discusses model papers with the class, we should request copies to be kept on file.

O.K. At this point we've completed our legwork, organized our files, or fed our computers. It will be at least two weeks into the semester before our first student arrives mumbling "transcendentalism . . . Oversoul . . . humanism." During these weeks we could just settle back and wait for the throngs to arrive, but it's better if we do some further organizing.

We come upon another thorny problem here, one which is a little more difficult to solve. What happens when the matchup between student and tutor produces the student eager for ideas and approaches talking to the tutor who's never read the literature?

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[1]As a quick aside on this point, I should note that many literature-writing courses are using one of the new anthologies designed particularly for this approach. These anthologies can be very useful in the Center, not only for their primary sources, but also for their instructional modes. Many contain detailed sections explaining approaches to writing the paper. Little, Brown's Literature for Composition (Barnet, Berman, Burto, editors) includes three separate chapters offering guidelines to writing about fiction, poetry, and drama. W. W. Norton's Writing Themes About Literature provides another choice. Titles such as these should become permanent reference works on our Center's bookshelves.

There are at least a few ways to work around this little inconvenience. I don't think it's beneficial to assign students to a particular tutor, although there is evidence that such continuing arrangements are productive. In our case, we do want to match the student to a tutor with some familiarity of the literature. The easiest solution in our particular Center, as this situation arises, is to schedule the student with a peer tutor who's a senior literature major or with a professor/tutor from the English department.

There is another possibility: scheduling a limited, thirty minute to one hour, "study" or "brainstorming" session within the Center. What we attempt to do here is to discuss the literature with a very small group initially, rather than with individual students. A signup sheet can be posted, announcing "Brainstorming session--Topics for The Grapes of Wrath." We'll run the session with only three or four students, trying to maintain very small groups to provide for individual attention. With a small number, we can encourage all of the students to interact, to offer topics and approaches. Frequently these sessions begin with the students asking for clarification regarding some aspect of the work itself. We can't expect perceptive and clearly written responses if the students are sincerely confused about the text. Again it's apparent that our tutor/leader must be familiar with the literature.

One item that must be stressed to the students is the absolute necessity for clear, careful reading of the text on their part. In these study sessions, if the work is short

enough, we might even devote a few minutes to reading it aloud. Naturally, poetry works the easiest in this case. However, a brief short story such as Hemingway's "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," might quickly be read aloud, perhaps with the students reading the dialogue of the two waiters. What we're trying to achieve here, often in response to the students' request, is an understanding of the basic content, the "paraphrasable content," what the poem says, as critics like John Crowe Ransom teach us. Now, we're not going to be able to read The Sound and The Fury or Grapes from cover to cover, but we can dispel misconceptions or misreadings. In one session of mine, a student couldn't comprehend how another was formulating his thesis around a discussion of the turtle from chapter three of Grapes as a symbol of the Joads' determined trek to California. "The turtle was crushed when a truck ran over it," he offered emphatically; whereupon the other student advised him of his misreading. Generally, the students accept and respond well to each other's evaluations in these groups.

The value inherent in a Writing Center study session hopefully becomes clearer. With a small group, the students are likely to ask questions they're reluctant to ask of their professors. The small group can be instrumental in dispelling misconceptions or in offering additional explanations. And the students really do start to aid one another as they seriously begin to develop approaches and topics in a controlled setting. The tutor is discussion leader. He can provide immediate feedback on a suggested topic: too broad, unlikely to be

supportable from the text, inconsistent with the professor's expectations for the paper.

There are a few problems with this type of study session which deserve brief mention. The first is that the word can get out, and the sessions become immensely popular. Students, the ingenious little critters that they are, might try to use a session solely as a means for determining a topic in cases where they haven't even read the literature. To overcome this potential dilemma, I've found it useful to have a brief, five minute, talk with each student about a day prior to the actual session. I basically try to determine his particular problem ahead of time. It's possible to weed out or discourage the non-readers with a few apt questions: What type of paper are you thinking about? Share some of your perceptions and your approaches with me.

Another problem might well be that the Center just cannot offer a sufficient number of these sessions to accommodate the interested students. A limited number of sessions, then, are scheduled and conducted on a first come-first served basis with any overflow being directed to the one-on-one discussions with a tutor. I would not advise opening up a session to more than five or six students. The interaction and effectiveness diminish as the numbers increase.

Also a study session is not meant to be a substitute for the classroom instruction. In the five minute briefing prior to the session, I often ask if the student has consulted with his professor regarding an explication of the text or approval

for a thesis he's already focused. Like all other services of the Writing Center, the study session is a requested supplement to, not substitute for, the classroom. In our Center, we return a form to the professor with the student's name and with a brief synopsis of the service provided and the discussion held.

Normally following one of these sessions, I'll ask the student to sign up for a thirty minute individual tutoring appointment. During this time, I can continue to help the student arrive at a thesis. First of all, this is a good time to remember those files we established earlier. I'll check the files to see if this student's professor requires a certain approach to the literature. Generally speaking, in composition courses responding to literature, I've found that most approaches can be categorized into the methods hinted at earlier: 1) the students are asked to compose an impressionistic, personal response to the literature in which some aspect of their reading is related to their own experiences; or 2) the students are asked to develop a critical approach normally centered around an aspect of new or formalistic criticism, less frequently centered upon a biographical or historical approach. The first category usually results in an original, primary source essay; the second leads the student to the library, secondary sources, and research methods.

In dealing further with the first approach, the personal response, we can initially ask the student to talk about what he's read and his reaction to the literature. If the student

hasn't been in a study session, I'll try to determine how well he understands what he's read. Probing questions can include among others:

What's the author trying to say in this work?

What do you see as his major point? Can you relate to it?

Can you compare any of your own experiences or observations to the overall work? To a character in the work? To any limited segment of the work?

Can we focus in on that area and try to build a thesis statement for your response?

This type of questioning will help the student achieve a perspective around which he can construct a personal, impressionistic response. Recent application of these questions led students to the following issues from Steinbeck's Grapes:

"That chapter on used-car salesmen hit me. They certainly haven't changed much."

"I know how the Joads felt when they were called 'Okies.' I feel the same way when I hear . . ."

"My Dad is part of a major corporation. From what I see, the company is very concerned for people. It does all sorts of charitable things."

When the student begins to make these types of assessments, we are on our way to helping him with the structure, organization of his personal response. We can now talk with him about the various modes and methods of development which might fit his purpose best. In this type of paper,

classification analysis and comparison/contrast are two structures which can be used to express and develop the relationship between his personal experiences and the incidents from the literature. We can help our writer outline the topic ("Can I show first what the Joads experienced and then move on to show how I lived through the same situation in our family?"), and suggest suitable support and development. For the student who is composing the personal, impressionistic response, we're ready to send him off to complete his first full draft, with the invitation to return for its appraisal.

The other student, asked to compose a critical response, will normally require more detailed discussion and explanation about his assignment. Oftentimes, this student's initial problem is that he doesn't understand what he can do with these critical modes. He's heard his professor talk about structure in the novel, character development, irony, symbol, theme, and the author's background. So here he is, in the Center, with a vague idea about a paper which, he asserts, will discuss all those points thoroughly, but he can't seem to get beyond two hundred words! So we begin. Probably the most common critical evaluation for about the last twenty years or so in our classrooms has been this textual or formalistic approach to literature. Yes, the student has heard his professor talk about it. Our writer has probably even learned some of it by the process of osmosis in the classroom. The new twist is that the approach, once restricted to literature courses for those few majors, is now filtering down into the literature-writing

composition course. Here we, as tutors, may have to help the student understand and separate aspects of the approach.[2] Common pitfalls experienced by writers in dealing with this type of essay include these: 1) they try to cover too much in a paper (I really did experience the example cited above); 2) they are so unfamiliar with this type of assignment that they have a complete mental block about starting any topic; 3) they try to impose personal experiences into this essay where they don't belong. The first problem is typical because it's easier for the student to discuss eight symbols or five characters in his essay, than it is for him to restrict the topic. He can compose 50 words on each, rather than 500 on one. The second and third problems can be overcome by drawing the student out in discussion, helping him to see that he knows more than he thinks.

If we can overcome any or all of these three setbacks, we'll find ourselves on more familiar ground: limitation of the topic to a focused thesis. Once the limitation is discussed and achieved, we have to assure the student that he can indeed create and compose an 800-word paper on one character, or the author's use of one symbol. Occasionally two new words will

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[2]As another aside, we might also keep on our Center's bookshelves titles which will provide introductory aid in applying a critical approach. A good start includes A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature (Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Willingham, editors) from Harper and Row. Also helpful might be any of Laurence Perrine's literature anthologies, Literature: Structure, Sound and Sense is one example from Harcourt, Brace. Perrine's explanations of components such as character, theme, etc. are useful to students composing this type of essay.

enter the student's life during these tutoring sessions: the library and research. We may have to advise our young scholar in the appropriate means to seek out secondary sources with further suggestions regarding how he might incorporate these sources correctly into a paper. To avoid problems and accusations of plagiarism, we need to stress the accurate use of quotes and paraphrasings with proper footnoting and documentation. If the student has been asked to write about the author's life as it's reflected in the work or the social milieu of the work, we must be certain to correctly advise him on the nature of research as an indispensable tool for the completion of his paper.

It used to be that only literature majors were asked to produce such papers, and as literature majors, they had a grasp on the research methods which they had to follow. Today, the engineering major may be visiting the Center asking how he can possibly produce a paper on Steinbeck's political philosophy in Grapes when he's never written a research paper before. We should be prepared to help him.

My point in this presentation is that, with thought and planning, we can be prepared to help these students in our Centers. Each of us can apply, modify, discard or add to the ideas presented here to fashion the approach for our own needs and capacities. We're moving beyond basic skills in this type of tutoring. That's good for our Centers and for the indispensibility of our Centers to the overall university.

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